

Testimony

Submitted to the

Appropriations Committee

February 11, 2009

**GOVERNOR'S BILL NO. 830 AN ACT CONCERNING THE GOVERNOR'S
RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING EDUCATION**

Good afternoon Senator Harp, Representative Geragosian, and members of the Appropriations Committee.

I am Dr. Phil Streifer, Superintendent of the Bristol Public Schools. Thank you for the opportunity to speak this afternoon. I would like to focus my comments today on the impact that state revenue has on our school district and why temporary relief from mandates is so important.

Last week I presented three budget scenarios to the Bristol Board of Education. The first is for a budget that simply moves everything forward to next year – nothing new. This is important because Bristol is a successful urban, priority district. Maintaining these services and programs will require about \$3.8M in new spending, or about 3.7% on a \$101M operating budget (which includes building in rising special education costs – including a current deficit of \$1.4M). Additionally we had been told to expect a cut in ECS aid of somewhere around \$5.3M. Together, these factors would add up to an 8-9% budget shortfall for my City Finance Board or about 2 mils on the local tax rate. Fortunately the Governor's budget calls for a freeze in state ECS aid and while that is helpful, it does not singly close my budget gap. Federal assistance, should that too materialize, will help, but only in the short run because that aid will end for FY11.

To cope with these issues and the probability of no new local taxes, I presented two detailed alternative budget scenarios to cope with this revenue shortfall. The real problem I face is that any reductions we make must only come from the 'non-mandated' side of my budget which represents about 70% of the total. I can't touch the other 30%. So, a net reduction of 8-9% on the 70% of our programming which is not mandated amounts to a net 12% reduction in 'regular education services'. That is why I detailed the possibility of unprecedented levels of layoffs that would deeply impact the quality education in Bristol. Couple this with a rising poverty and mobility rate in our district and you have a recipe for disaster for these young children.

Unprecedented times require extra-ordinary action. We simply can't keep squeezing the 'non-mandated' side of education budgets; we need relief in the form of suspending various unfunded mandates controlled solely by the State.

We need to recognize that the Scheff Decision, in its implementation, is another mandate on local districts – with local costs now mounting. Superintendents are not opposed to the Magnet School Program or Scheff; some, including myself, however are opposed to any unfunded, or partially funded mandate that impacts that 70% of their budget which is 'not mandated' and where reductions must be made. The State simply has to fully fund magnet tuitions. Other testimony here today on this issue details the change in perspective districts are now beginning to take on this issue – moving away from their role as willing

participants due to the pressure magnet school tuitions are placing on the 'regular education' side of their budgets and programming.

CAPSS – the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents defines unfunded mandates that may be eliminated as "those laws and regulations not directly related to the core mission of increasing student learning or eliminating the achievement gap among groups which require expenditure of local dollars or staff time. They ask that no new mandates be enacted in this session. Further they ask that no new requirements even related to our core mission, such as Secondary School reform or Mentor Assistance Program be enacted without sufficient dollars to implement them.

CAPSS appreciates that every mandate was a well intentioned attempt to improve the lives of children; however, they believe it is time to create a task force of Superintendents of Schools and State Department of Education officials to review all mandates to determine if they are relevant to our core mission. I made this very recommendation to the State Board back on December 3rd, 2008 and we are now already in February with no action.

I know you have a tough job ahead as do my colleagues. We pledge to work with you to find 'out of the box' solutions to these unprecedented challenges. I have been doing this for a long time and this economic downturn is the most challenging I have experienced. Hardest hit will be the most vulnerable members of our society, our children especially the poor and underprivileged.

Respectfully,

Philip A. Streifer, Ph.D.
Bristol Superintendent of Schools